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TDCJ supports our veterans

By Oliver J. Bell, Chairman



Oliver J. Bell

Many of our veterans leave the military and face an array of life challenges, including difficult experiences, transitions, troubling symptoms and men-

tal health conditions. All too often veterans return home needing support to address symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, alcohol and drug abuse, depression, anxiety, psychosis and mood disorders.

There are nearly 11,000 offenders with past military service incarcerated in TDCJ. Promoting and establishing programs to address the needs of those who served our military and are now under TDCJ's supervision, while ensuring they receive proper treatment and referrals, is essential to improving the lives of our offender veterans. Their success depends on support from everyone who interacts with them: friends, family members, and people in our communities across the nation, as well as veterans service organizations, community-based groups and local health care providers that have direct contact with veterans

every day. TDCJ supports veterans with a keen awareness of both their needs and the various resources that are available.

TDCJ Veterans Reentry Services

The agency has historically made publications such as the Department of Veterans Affairs' *A Guide for Veterans Incarcerated in Texas* available to incarcerated offenders, and also facilitates visits by representatives of the Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN). A new Veterans Affairs (VA)-produced video providing an overview of the VA's services for incarcerated offenders is being shown during the intake process.

With funding provided by the Texas Legislature, TDCJ has added more reentry coordinator positions in order to enhance existing services and serve more releasing offenders, to include releasing veterans. Pre-release services include requesting copies of DD-214 discharge papers and other military records, and applying for health benefits. Medical and education records are provided to the Texas Veterans Commission, their local VA facility and/or their County Services Officers when

requested. TDCJ staff provides veterans with information regarding higher education opportunities and links the offender to the veterans' representative at the college of their choice, the Texas Veterans Commission, VA, or County Services' office in order to determine which college benefits are available.

Other veteran reentry services and activities include collaborating and sharing information with the VISN to help offenders whose requests for copies of their DD-214s have been rejected. TDCJ works closely with unit medical staff to identify appropriate medical facilities for veterans receiving a Medically Recommended Intensive Supervision release or in need of medically appropriate residence or care upon parole or discharge. TDCJ works in coordination with the Texas Veterans Commission to develop Continuity of Care and submit benefits applications for eligible veterans. TDCJ staff acts as liaison with the Texas Military Veteran Peer Network to develop a comprehensive Continuity of Care network for incarcerated veterans. Additionally, agency staff participates as members of both the Texas Coordinated Council for Veterans Services and the Texas Council on Incarcerated Veterans and Jail

Continued on page 2

Continued from page 1

Diversion where they develop recommendations for the Criminal Justice Workgroup.

Of the many support and rehabilitation programs TDCJ offers, three of them have a dramatic and positive impact on the lives of our veterans.

Patriot Paws Service Dog Program - Lane Murray and Crain units

The mission of Patriot PAWS (Pawsitive Approach Worthwhile Solutions) is to train and provide service dogs of the highest quality at no cost to disabled American veterans and others with mobile disabilities, in order to help restore their physical and emotional independence. Patriot PAWS trains service dogs to perform a variety of assistance behaviors including helping patients with post-traumatic stress disorder. Our primary goal is to increase an individual's self-sufficiency, so each dog is trained to perform services to fulfill the specific needs of the owner.

Military Veteran Peer Network - Travis County and Dominguez state jails

The Military Veteran Peer Network is an affiliation of service members, veterans and family members dedicated to establishing camaraderie and trust among themselves, identifying and vetting community resources for veterans and, collectively, contributing to the communities where we live. The Military Veteran Peer Network has collaborated with TDCJ to provide in-person peer support to

incarcerated veterans in a pilot program at the Travis and Dominguez state jails. Upon release, this program will link the veteran to peer support in any community they may return to across the state.

The Military Veteran Peer Network also sent more than 40 peer-network members to be trained as TDCJ volunteers at the 5th Annual Justice-Involved Veterans Conference in May. These volunteers will support the criminal justice-involved veteran in the community, on probation, in county jail, in a TDCJ prison unit or on parole. Never before has such a broad and direct effort been established to meet the behavioral health care needs of criminal justice-involved Texas veterans.

The agency is also meeting with volunteer groups to develop program support for an offender dormitory specifically designated to house veterans.

The Health Care for Reentry Veterans (HCRV) Program - Statewide

Health Care for Reentry Veterans (HCRV) is the oversight program within the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. VISN specialists collaborate with TDCJ through a Memorandum of Understanding to provide services to special needs veteran offenders. HCRV services include outreach and pre-release assessment services for veterans in prison; referrals and linkages to medical, psychiatric and social services, including employment services upon release; short-term

case management assistance upon release; and providing information to veterans while they are incarcerated so they may plan for their own reentry.

Military veterans bring valuable skills, experience and qualifications to the civilian workforce and we are proud of veterans who overcome challenges, reach positive outcomes for treatment and recovery, and find a path to a law-abiding and fulfilling life. I believe that every military service member should be supported before they deploy, while they're gone and when they return, and I am encouraged that TDCJ provides opportunities for our military veterans to receive peer support and service linkage during the difficult time of their incarceration and return to the community. ●